

A communication barrier confuses the dateline to this column here in Angel Fire, New Mexico. Realize that in the shortgrass country f-i-r-e is pronounced like f-a-r. Nothing except the trained ear distinguishes how "angel" fits. That's the excuse for how I arrived here.

First, understand that to go to Roswell, New Mexico and on to Mertzon Texas from the Guadalupe Inn in Santa Fe, you turn left onto Agua Fria and take a right on St. Francis to head on out of town. Second, don't ask where to buy gasoline at the secondhand book store on St. Francis. If you do, read the road signs on St. Francis, and do not put in a book tape the guy gave you on how to recover from road rage focused on red cars.

By following those directions, you will avoid facing, an hour later, the need to stop and ask for new directions at the fork in the highways going toward Taos or Espanola. At this point, to the answer in plain English (Mertzon, again), you hear, you think, "Eighty miles. To the left."

Expect no answer to the next question: "Where in the heck did Clines Corners go?" as your guide becomes busy waiting on a customer. (Big truck stop and curio joint on the way to Roswell and an intersection on Interstate 10.)

Out in the car take note how familiar the road looks, anyway, without a beer joint owner for a guide. Pull up the numbers of times you have driven the road from Santa Fe down to Roswell. How you once were flown up to Charlie Waller's ranch in the mountains where you could see Clines Corners if it wasn't in a canyon. What a great host ol' Charlie was, driving you around to see all his big ewes and fat lambs. How well you slept that night up on the mountain top.

Time may have slipped away, or it seemed right up the road was the Kit Carson road in Taos going to Angel Fire and Eagle Nest. There the decision came to drive back 80 or 90 miles to start over on going home to a 106-degree heat wave or go 19 more miles to a ski resort lodge of some 40 degrees at night at Angel Fire. Further, think back — did that saloon keeper think you were saying "h-o-w f-a-r", or plain "f-i-r-e", or was he on the same hearing aid circuit that you switched on at checkout back in Santa Fe?

You need to listen and then forget the next language: "Good gosh-a mighty Miss Molly's Santa Fe Railroad pass, how in the holly hell did you end up on the way to Angel Fire, New Mexico on the way home to Mertzon?" (Remember, this is the writer who avoids raw language to the degree

that he calls a well-known tribe "Blanketed Posterior Indians." His own mother called him a prude.)

Angel Fire: The lady who took the hotel reservation claimed to be from Fort Worth. She quoted a week's rate on a fourth floor room with a balcony overlooking the mountains. Come back on again with the language barrier, even with other Texans. She interpreted w-e-a-k, my condition, to be w-e-e-k, the amount of stay, or six days more than overnight or one day.

One thing became clear. She wanted the last four digits on the back of the credit card. Right here, we begin to speak the same universal language. "Front-side only, little cowgirl," I say. "My bankers in Mertzon, Mr. Mertz and Mr. Whitley, will educate you about credit cards. Here's the number. Mertzon, by the way, 'Sweet Plum,' is several times larger than Angel Fire." (Note the new crispness in speech.)

At last share the taste of victory as she drops the credit card investigation to give out the room key. One more week away doesn't make any difference when you know or admit you only have 66 heifers and five bulls left to your brand.

Try to relate without being here. Out on the balcony, checked in, you gaze into misty green shadows on the

timbered slopes. Uncle Goat Whiskers and Doug Poage fled from a ranch south of Santa Fe with their cattle somewhere up one of those valleys during the Big Drouth in 1950. Uncle Goat Whiskers' only comment was "We didn't even make it back with our fixtures that wreck."

Do you get homesick? This morning after withdrawing cash in Santa Fe, I let my hand rest awhile on top of the ATM. Kind of brought back memories, like Main Street in Mertzon, and Bank Hill before they cleared the courthouse site.

Don't worry about me. Just don't make the same mistake unless you know how to explain (justify) the situation.